

Sight and Insight: Stage Pictures in *Hedda Gabler*

Kay Unruh Des Roches

The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. (Berger 7)

Given the semiotic richness of a dramatic text, it is curious that so many critics of drama privilege the dialogue of a playscript, even to the point of erasing the stage instructions. Not until recently has it become customary to acknowledge that visual codes are equally as important as verbal codes,¹ and that the traditional privileging of verbal codes has seriously affected our idea of what constitutes a dramatic text. Martin Esslin (1987) has recently called for a re-evaluation of critical approaches to drama; but being concerned primarily with drama in performance, he does not deal with the ways in which a reader could make use of stage instructions. Surprisingly, theatrical practitioners also seem to privilege a script's dialogue. Quick to argue for complete license in matters of staging, they seldom alter the dialogue in any significant way, which suggests that they, too, consider a script's dialogue to be the essential text. For instance, when the actress Janet Suzman (1980) notes, in preparation for her role of Hedda Gabler, that "all stage directions are a drag," she expresses a traditional bias; but when she goes on to say, "If they are good ones, they describe to you the author's intentions as regards the character's inner state. If they are bad, they dictate to you and should be disregarded" (97), she is making an assumption about the function of stage instructions which places them *outside* the essential text, as a form of footnoting.

The marginalizing, or even erasure, of visual codes is evident also in Ibsen criticism, despite agreement among critics that Ibsen is a consummate

Kay Unruh Des Roches is Associate Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg where she teaches classical and modern dramatic literature. She has published articles on modern drama and Norwegian literature; she has also directed numerous plays, among them her own translation of *The Lady from the Sea*.

theatrical craftsman. Critics like John Northam, who pays careful attention to aspects of staging in constructing his interpretations, are rare;² moreover, because their interpretations are usually character-based, they see the stage as a frame and support-system for the actor/characters, not as part of the dialogue of the play. Most disappointing, however, are those critics who propose semiotic or structuralist approaches to Ibsen's staging--as do Freddie Rokem (1988),³ and Richard Hornby (1980)⁴--and then use the information revealed in stage instructions to support traditional thematic interpretations that are ultimately logocentric in their assumptions that stage realities are surface manifestations of a central core of meaning. The erasure I spoke of is, therefore, caused not only by critics who are inattentive to stage instructions, but also by those who see them merely as a means to describe, comment on, or embody concerns made more articulate in the verbal dialogue. Although it is true that stage instructions sometimes provide commentary about a "character's inner state," and sometimes mirror the action, their role in mediating between the dramatic text and a reader is much more dynamic than supportive in that they frequently counterpoint the dialogue by evoking stage pictures which are equally as important as the words spoken. Meaning, then, will not depend so much on the way one code mirrors or represents the other as it will on the interaction created by the differences between them. By exploring the semiotic function of some of the stage pictures in *Hedda Gabler*, I hope to show that the information codified in the stage instructions is an essential component of the dialogue of the drama.

That the stage is always simultaneously a symbolic representation in a fictional world and a physical presence in the factual world complicates matters when reading and discussing playscripts. Although it is conventional to distinguish between the text as written construct and the text as theatrical construct (Elam 3), this distinction presupposes an exclusiveness not entirely warranted; clearly a performance based on a written 'play' is not likely to exist without reference to a playscript, nor is a playscript likely to exist without reference to a its performability. This interdependence calls for a distinction to be made as well between the fictional construct and the codes in the script which physicalize the stage for the reader and *imply* a production. The 'stage' is therefore a mental construct mediated on the one hand by a dramatic text consisting of characters and dialogue in representational space and, on the other hand, by an accompanying theatrical text of instructions that provoke us to 'visualize' a particular space organized in a particular way, to 'block' the movements of actors and to assimilate all this into the text we are 'producing.'

How important that link is in *Hedda Gabler* becomes clear when we trace Ibsen's instructions for the use of the "elegant little writing desk" which replaces Hedda's piano in the second act. Insofar as the desk is specifically Hedda's (she holds the keys to it and uses it to lock up personal and private items like the pistols and the manuscript) it has a purely symbolic function in the dramatic text. But in the third act we also become aware of the desk as

a physical entity and find that this seemingly arbitrary replacement for the piano, positioned in a seemingly arbitrary way across the stage from the door, becomes a signifying element in a dramatic strategy that affects our reading of the scene.

Throughout Act III, Hedda's attention is fixed on Løvborg and his manuscript; but because Ibsen instructs that all the action is to take place at the door (where Tesman, Løvborg and Brack enter), Hedda is pulled back and forth between the desk and the door with each interruption. She first crosses the stage to hide the manuscript in the bookcase when Brack enters, and then returns to the desk to look at it after his exit; she locks it into the desk drawer when she hears Løvborg in the hall and goes to greet him at the door; she then recrosses the stage to get the "souvenir" for him and brings it to him; after his exit, she again returns to the desk, takes the manuscript, crosses the stage and sits in the armchair placed just below the door. Even on small stages, these six crosses unaccompanied by speaking lines would require a significant amount of playing time which suggests that, unless we are prepared to dismiss Ibsen as a careless craftsman, we must read the repetitive movement as information about the scene.

Because the repetition is foregrounded, we look for its meaning in the movement itself. As we know, repetition plays on expectations. It is a well-worn device to create suspense, obviously useful here in deferring the answer to our question about what Hedda intends to do with Løvborg's manuscript. Mechanical repetition of this sort is also a familiar comic device (Bergson), which is more problematic; even if we were to accept that comedy is part of the mode of this play,⁵ we would probably agree that the destruction of Løvborg, the action Hedda is engaged in, is no laughing matter. Although it might not generate laughter, this foregrounding of Hedda's repetitive movements calls our attention to something mechanistic, and therefore ludicrous, in Hedda's actions, and alerts us to the increasing grotesqueness of what she is doing. Our fear that Hedda will not tell Løvborg about the manuscript is followed by shock as we recognize that Hedda is bringing Løvborg a pistol, not the manuscript, and incredulity when we see her begin to burn the manuscript. In this way, the pictures evoked by the stage instructions provide a subtle counterpoint to the action of the scene which significantly influences our response.

But it is one thing to accept the importance of stage pictures; it is another to define the relation between what stage instructions invite us to 'see' and how we make meaning from it. If my students are typical of readers, I would venture to guess that few people visualize either the characters or the stage when reading a playscript, which makes this an almost-too hypothetical problem. However, as it is at the core of my thesis, I must attempt to make some sense of it.

In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser observes that the images evoked when one reads a novel always differ from the visual images we see when it is

translated to film. He goes on to account for this difference by making a distinction between what he calls optical vision and imagistic vision. He suggests that when we read literary texts,

we always have to form mental images, because the 'schematized aspects' of the text only offer us knowledge of the conditions under which the imaginary object is to be produced. This knowledge sparks the process of ideation, but it is not itself the object to be viewed; this exists in the not yet formulated combination of given data. (137)

These mental images, Iser, tells us, are not really visual; they are ideas produced by the imagination in response to given data.

This has some interesting implications for reading playscripts. If we were to accept that in a playscript many of the 'schematized aspects' are 'performance codes' (i.e., instructions about set, lighting, character, movement, sound), then the information about staging would also "offer us knowledge of the *conditions under which the imaginary object is to be produced*" (my emphasis). In other words, stage instructions contextualize the fictional action of the *dramatic text*. It follows then that the more detailed the codes, the more complex the context and the more interesting the 'production' of the 'imaginary object.'

Although we might accept that the reading of the written text could approximate such a process, any dramatic critic would find Iser's bias against visual images problematic. Not that we have not all been similarly disappointed when we see a favourite play "botched" in production. But Iser misses the point there: he implies that what we 'see' in a production is an inferior version of the 'imaginary object' evoked by the words of the playscript. On the contrary, what we 'see' on stage is to the production what the performance codes are to the playscript. As Elam points out, the pictures we see within the limits of the physical stage space differ from the mental images we construct from those visual clues (Elam 67). Here he appropriates for the stage what Iser claims for the written text. Although in a theatrical production many of the 'schematized aspects' are visual, the 'object to be produced' cannot be made visible to an audience any more than to a reader; in both cases it remains the prerogative of the imagination. So also with character. Dramatic critics would likely agree with Iser that a 'character' is a mental construct, "a bearer of meaning" (Iser 138), but would disagree with the implication that a pictorial representation of a character could in any way interfere with its imagistic status. A 'character' is by convention other than the series of signs and gestures made by a physical voice and body on stage; and if the actor must aim to bring a character 'to life,' a director must find the means to infuse the character with meaning. The physical scene would therefore provide the necessary circumstances for our experience, but the

imagination of the viewer, given the freedom to do so, would still create the 'character.'

The burning of the manuscript, which brings Hedda's repetitive movements across the stage to a halt, is itself intensely physical, and presents us with a rich texture of conditions from which our imaginations can produce images. Were we to picture what Ibsen instructs us to see on Hedda's last cross-over, we would see her take the manuscript out of the drawer, open the wrapping at one end for a glimpse of the pages within, half-pull a few pages out, look at them, cross the stage, and then sit in the armchair beside the stove with the manuscript on her lap. Even knowing that she will burn the manuscript, we are aware of the theatrical intent here: we expect that she will read this book which has caused so much fuss. That Ibsen instructs her to sit still for a few minutes only widens the gap which involves us. When we then see her open the stove door, unwrap the package and throw a page into the fire we are caught between shock and recognition as we overhear her whispered words: "*Nu brenner jeg ditt barn, Thea--Du med krushåret*" (Now I'm burning your child, Thea--you with your curly hair); throwing a few more pages into the fire, she again whispers, "*Ditt og Eilert Løvborgs barn*" (yours and Eilert Løvborg's child); finally burning the entire manuscript, she whispers, "*Nu brenner--nu brenner jeg barnet*" (Now I'm burning--burning the child).

In the scene as described by Ibsen, the essential contradiction between the simple, mechanical execution of Hedda's action and the enormity of its implications is central. As discussed above, this contradiction accounts for much of the grotesqueness we sense in Hedda's burning of the manuscript. It is not only the act of destruction which we respond to, although that is monstrous enough; what is absent prompts us to create an image large enough to warrant our response. In the repetitive actions we perceive a ritual which cannot be *shown* without compromising the surface truth of the action; and in the whispered repetition we hear a chant which cannot be *spoken* without shattering the realistic framework of the play. By allowing us imaginative space, these simple everyday actions demand a meaning equivalent to their effect, which we then provide.

By contrast, Janet Suzman tells us that in playing the scene she would sometimes "squat down, cradling and rocking the manuscript like a baby, gazing at the awful hot coals" (101). Here the actress has moved beyond the visual signifier "burning the manuscript" to its imagistic signified, "burning the baby," thereby replacing the picture with its image. In other words, she is playing an interpretation, not the scene. By taking the image-making prerogative away from the audience and giving it to the character, the actress leaves us no freedom to move imaginatively toward deeper and darker matters which must remain unvisualized. When in a further alteration of the text, the actress tells us that she used the dialogue as a cognitive act in response to Hedda's action--"Hedda making sense out of a complex, symbolic, but above

all, impulsive act" (101)--she undermines the irony of the scene, leaving us with nothing to do but watch Hedda explain her symbol.

Significantly, in Ibsen's version Hedda's action is not impulsive. Nor is she, as so many critics have suggested, cold and spiteful. From her repetitive movements and words, we see that she is caught on a treadmill; she has crossed the line of what it means to be a rational, social being. And in her use of Løvborg's symbol--the child--the symbol she herself repudiated earlier ("After all, it's only a book") she signals her awareness that what she is engaged in is the murder of everything Thea has created. It is but a short step from here to the next murder, that of her own child, which will come with her suicide.

I have been arguing that stage instructions contain codified information about stage pictures which in turn act as a catalyst to the imagination. In this way picture-making is part of a textual strategy which influences the way we make meaning. But if stage pictures are the building blocks of dramatic meaning, they do not therefore exist as independent structures. On the contrary, we see them always against the larger frame of the set which, in *Hedda Gabler*, is the proscenium stage. The single visual representation Ibsen calls for is therefore a framed picture, an effect heightened by the symmetry of the design.⁶

The set as Ibsen describes it is comprised of two rooms, a larger downstage room leading by way of an archway into a smaller room. Across from each other in the main room are two doors, the right one leading to the hall, and the left one to a glazed verandah. The symmetry of design is repeated in the decor: not only is the furniture of the outer room arranged symmetrically, and echoed in the back room, but the framed portrait of General Gabler on the back wall is balanced midstage by the framed entrance into the back room and downstage by the frame of the proscenium: a frame within a frame within a frame with General Gabler dead centre. But in addition to its symbolical value, the symmetry is functional in that it sets up expectations of order by drawing attention to any informality or disorder.

Act I capitalizes on this principle. Played against the imposed symmetry, the actions of the first scene create tension. The bright sunlight streaming through the glass doors and the profusion of flowers for which there is no "decent place," Berte and Miss Tesman's domestic chatter, and Jorgen Tesman's informality, all cut across the formality of the decor. Predictably, Hedda's controlled entrance--her arrested movement at the entrance to the outer stage, her formal greeting, her objection to the light, her aloofness--makes us uncomfortably aware that seen through her eyes, the room she had arranged the night before for her morning entrance has become unruly with light, flowers, and the unrestrained familiarity of her husband embracing his old aunt. Predictably, also, Hedda's outburst about Miss Tesman's hat and parasol, when played against a restrictive set, is seen as an inappropriate loss of restraint.

In Act II the slight rearrangement of furniture further accents the symmetry: the piano has been replaced by the writing desk, the excess flowers have been removed--although Thea Elvsted's bouquet is prominently displayed on the centre table--and a small table has been added to the upstage right sitting area. It is a room readied for an event, as is Hedda [*dressed to receive callers*]. But against this restored order, Hedda is [*standing at the open doors loading a revolver*]. Again we are aware of a disjunction, this time created by Hedda herself; and Assessor Brack's less than formal entrance by way of the back door gives her the perfect excuse to give vent to those inclinations which are at odds with the restrictions she has imposed on herself. So, when at the end of the act the event for which she and the room have been carefully groomed is seen to be taking place elsewhere, and Hedda is left with Thea to wait for the return of the carousing men, we see that the activities of Act II have turned the set into a parody of its designed intentions.

In Act III, the room that could not withstand a hat out of place has become a waiting room. Heavy curtains cover the windows and doors, the fire is almost out, and a single lamp on the centre table is turned down. In the near-darkness, Thea sits huddled in Hedda's armchair near the stove, while Hedda, covered by a blanket, lies asleep on the downstage sofa. All the carefully controlled lines have gone askew: the room is disordered; all the characters wear their formal evening clothes from the night before; furthermore, the men have been drinking heavily, and the women have been waiting all night, so that they must all show signs of disarray. Hedda's actions--she opens the curtains to let the morning sunlight flood the dishevelled room, she sends Thea up to sleep in her own room, she calls the servant to attend to the disorder, she kneels in front of the stove to prod the fire into life--all show her attempting to reassert control over her environment; by the end of the act, her attempt at control will have led to the burning of the manuscript and the death of Løvborg. What was earlier an impression of an uneasy disjunction between the restrictions of space and the requirements of living is here presented as an outright collapse.

In contrast to the disorder presented in the first three acts, Act IV presents an image of restraint. With the curtains drawn against the last grey light of evening, we note that the absence of light on stage remains throughout the act a feature of its scenic organization. Dressed in black, Hedda wanders aimlessly up and down, in harmony with the sombre decor. But if the symmetry of the set has worked previously as a functional strategy to reveal the collapse of order, in Act IV it serves also to reveal the rigidifying of social order as a response to the anarchy of Hedda's actions. In this way the symmetry of the setting--in both its literal and figurative aspects--provides a predictability which acts like an image of fate. It is against this frame that we see the pictures in *Hedda Gabler*.

Although we talk of seeing pictures within the frame of the set, it is well to remind ourselves that such language implies the model of painting (Elam

67) which, while useful, carries implications that in some important ways contradict the theatrical mode. What remains problematic is the question of time: we *think* about pictures in a play as discrete and framed segments, but *experience* them as temporal in much the same way we experience words or events as temporal; and in that they follow one another, each picture provides a context for later pictures. It follows that in addition to the relation between the spatial organization of any one picture and the set there is a temporal dimension which 'places' the picture in a story; as each picture is supplanted, it dissolves into memory and is recalled when we see it echoed in another picture. This accounts for the importance of repetition, not, however, as a structural (static) device only, but also as a dynamic strategy which serves to mark our sense that the action is moving into the future. It is this strong sense of history, brought to the theatre by the audience--what Edward Bond (1978) has called "anecdotal autobiography" (xviii)--which allows the playwright to build-in patterns of reference, so that a picture forgotten is remembered as an image (i.e., detached from time and place) when it is later echoed, changed or counterpointed.

An example of this would be the picture of Hedda standing at the glass doors, looking out. This picture is first "framed" in Act I, and later repeated in each act. Because its first occurrence is tied to the series of actions which culminate in the pantomime where Hedda vents her rage, we must pay attention to the visual schemata of the scene to see what information about it is embedded in the stage movements.

We notice, first, that from Hedda's initial entrance she has kept a physical distance between herself and the two Tesmans. She stops at the archway, which forces Miss Tesman to move upstage to greet her. When Tesman's enthusiasm about his old slippers prompts him to move upstage to show them to Hedda, she expresses her distaste by moving away from him to the stove; when he tenaciously follows her there, we see her move again, this time to the table at the centre where she finds herself sandwiched between her husband and his aunt. Physically trapped, she turns on them with the barb about Berte's hat. Here Hedda's rudeness echoes the lack of restraint she silently deplores in the Tesmans.

But this scene is followed by an incident which shows that Hedda can exercise admirable restraint, even when severely provoked. Miss Tesman is about to leave when Tesman placatingly calls her attention to Hedda's blooming beauty; Hedda's immediate response is to cross the stage to the glass doors. But Miss Tesman follows her there and [*takes her head and brings it toward her with both hands, and kisses her hair*]; with consummate restraint Hedda [*politely*] frees herself from the old aunt. What her restraint costs her we see when Tesman and Miss Tesman exit: [*Hedda paces the room, raising her arms and clenching her fists in fury . . . Then she flings back the curtains from the glass doors and stands there looking out.*] This is how Tesman will find her [*calm and controlled*] when he returns moments later. The picture is fixed in

our minds with his question: "What are you standing and looking at, Hedda?" and her answer: "I'm just standing and looking at the leaves. They're so golden. And so withered." Her answer not only transforms the brilliant autumn morning into the inevitable darkness of winter; it also connects her movement to the glass doors with her feeling of constraint, her denial of her pregnancy, and the ensuing darkness.

In this instance, insofar as the picture is the culminating point of a series of visual pictures, it is 'framed', static. However, insofar as her movement to the doors is a response to other actions, many of them verbal, it is also an action. Seeing the picture repeated, we not only compare it with previous similar pictures, we also expect that it will signal a progression in the action.

At the beginning of Act II, we again see Hedda standing at the open doors; however, different circumstances make it into a different picture. Then she had lamented the coming of winter; now, loading a revolver, she takes aim through narrow sights at the unbroken expanse of blue to shoot, as she tells Assessor Brack, into the sky. Dramatically speaking, 'to lament' and 'to shoot' are both actions: but they are different in that the first establishes Hedda as an object to be acted upon, and the second establishes her as an acting subject. Although her action comes to naught and her words continue to describe her as a victim, the picture is a momentary glimpse of someone who can take aim and fire. Later in the act, she returns to the doors three times, twice when her pregnancy is referred to, and a final time--this time drumming on the pane--while Tesman and Løvborg discuss Løvborg's book about the future. This last connection with the future completes the pattern in Act II--a future which she had chosen as the answer to her fear of futurelessness, but which has been complicated by her pregnancy, her distaste for the Tesmans, and the arrival of Løvborg. Although there is no evidence that her feeling of entrapment inside the house is in any way ameliorated by what she sees outside, her return to the doors in moments of stress creates a tension which marks a conflict in her.

In Act III the picture of Hedda looking out has changed: she goes to the glass doors twice, but in each case the focus of her attention is within the room, not outside it. In the first instance, after she has opened the curtains to let in the morning light, she moves to the desk, where she arranges her appearance, and then goes to the hall door to ring for Berte; in the second instance, after Brack has exited that way, [*she stands for a moment quite serious, looking out*]; she then goes upstage to look through the drawn curtains at the archway, and returns to the desk where she takes Løvborg's manuscript from the drawer. As with so much in Act III, this turning *from* the window to something within the room is another indication that Hedda has become an acting subject. In Act IV, however, there is an echo of the Act I picture: again Hedda is given a pantomime ending at the doors, after which she [*lifts the curtain aside slightly, and looks out into darkness*].⁷ What had been presented in Act I as a contradiction--the source of excessive light and the reminder of

oncoming darkness--has become in Act IV the total darkness she had envisioned in Act I.

John Northam, among others, has commented on these pictures. Referring specifically to the pantomime at the beginning of Act IV which includes Hedda's movement to the window he writes:

The business at the curtain is colored by the many previous occasions Hedda has stood by them, and by our recollection of her description of herself as a young girl who wanted to peep at a world she was not supposed to know about. The effect of the setting and the pantomime is to suggest a withdrawal, a falling back on the inner room; and with it a renewed uneasiness towards the outside world that Hedda seemed so happy to intervene in during Act III. It is a strong and striking preparation for the events that develop. (171)

If we think about the implications of the above statement, we can see there are some critical assumptions in it which privilege the verbal elements of the text over the visual entities. We note first that he passes over previous pictures of Hedda at the window in favour of a specific comment she makes in Act II to Løvborg, thereby specifying one possibility where many possibilities may exist. While this is an acceptable critical operation, it is, nonetheless, the process of selecting that establishes what in the text is central to our interpretation, and what is marginal. What Northam implies here is the centrality of the verbal text: the picture will be made meaningful by attention to the words, an assumption that undercuts the ironic relationship between verbal and visual entities in a dialogic text.

Although all literature is dialogic, drama is dialogic in some special ways. Not only do the multiple viewpoints interact and collide in the verbal text, the written script also implies a multi-media event where sight and sound confront each other. As I have been arguing, when words and pictures meet, the result is more likely to be irony or conflict than support for, or amplification of, a verbal text. One reason for this is that in drama nothing remains stable, not the characters, not the viewpoints, and not the pictures. To read a picture,⁸ we must read it in relation not only to the words, but also to other pictures; and to read it as it relates to other pictures requires that we establish the various contexts within which a picture takes on distinct meanings.

First, we might read it in the context of immediately previous pictures. Hedda paces a darkened stage, enters the lighted back room, plays, unseen, on the piano, then returns to the mainstage followed by Berte with a lighted lamp, and comes to rest at the glass doors (or "window" as Northam translates it). In this sequence, Hedda's "withdrawal" from the stage is balanced by her "return" to it. Second, we might read it in the context of similar previous pictures--we might note, for instance, that Hedda's movement to the glass doors in Act IV is a reversal of the movement away from the window in Act

III: then she had moved from the closed but uncurtained doors to peer into the curtained back room; now in Act IV, Hedda moves from the uncurtained back room to look out through the curtained doors into the dark. Next, we might read the picture in the context of what glass doors (or windows) have meant in other Ibsen plays.⁹ And lastly, we might read it in the light of our general cultural repertory--what windows might mean, for instance, in a religious or a psychological context.¹⁰ Given the variety of contexts and repertoires, interpretations would vary according to what parts of it are used, the most complete interpretation taking all these contexts into account.

Northam's reading of the pantomime does not isolate any picture in it for examination except insofar as it extends an interpretation already in progress; and, while it is clearly significant, as he points out, that the lighting in Act IV draws attention to the back room, Hedda's movements, as I will show later, do not necessarily suggest a "falling back on the inner room." It is also unclear in what ways the pantomime is "a strong and striking preparation for the events that develop." The implication that the pantomime is not part of the action is bothersome; one could as well say that the burning of the manuscript is a preparation for events which follow. Of course, it is; but it is also an action. When watching the pantomime we must assume that we are following an action; we trust something important is happening, or we would not be asked to pay such close and silent attention. Moreover, since this action is primarily visual, it is much more indeterminate than if it were accompanied by words and must therefore be read as a picture. If, as Northam suggests, we remember when Hedda stands by the window that she felt excluded from the outside world as an adolescent girl, or if we read the pantomime as a sign of her withdrawal into the "inner room,"¹¹ then we must also be aware that we are selecting-out frames of reference that could give us different readings. To read this picture in Act IV, we must read it as part of the pantomime; but we must also read it as the last picture in a pattern of similar pictures.

But if a pattern can provide a dynamic context for an individual picture, what then of pictures which oppose, even contradict prevailing patterns? In drama these contradictions are not always reconciled; often it is exactly the discrepancy between what we see and what we know from other sources that stops us from making too easy responses. What I want now to look at are some of the pictures which contradict what we know of Hedda's detachment. Most readers and viewers are quick to see evidence of it in Hedda's first scene where her spatial placement on stage confirms her aloof, even rude reminders that she is not a Tesman. This pattern of action, which isolates her and drives her to suicide, is the pattern most often discussed by critics. But there are pictures, often built into the same scenes, which contradict this prevailing pattern. For instance, despite Hedda's insularity, she is often seen touching Thea--stroking her hands and face, kissing her, embracing her, caressing her hair--contradictions often explained away as evidence of a manipulative nature. But even if we accept that she is manipulative, we must still account for the

fact that she manipulates through physical contact when it is distasteful to her. Furthermore, not all these instances are manipulative. As I hope to show by reading the stage instructions, these contradictions can point to another pattern of action in *Hedda Gabler*, a pattern constructed spatially and encoded in the physical movements and placement of the characters on stage.

Ibsen constructs the scene where Hedda and Thea first meet as a stark contrast to the previous scene with Miss Tesman. Whereas Hedda had made no move to greet the aunt, she now crosses the stage to warmly greet Thea at the door; whereas she had been restrained and evasive with the aunt, she now draws Thea in, and physically bullies her when she meets resistance. When Thea gets up to avoid questioning, Hedda [*pushes her down into the arm-chair . . . and seats herself on a footstool*]. During the conversation in which Hedda pries into Thea's private life, she [*moves closer on her footstool*], [*kisses her on the cheek*], [*slaps her hand gently*], [*leans against the arm of fru Elvsted's chair*]. Throughout this Thea is [*pleading*], [*confused*], [*anxious*], [*helpless*], [*uncertain*], [*evasive*]. And whereas Hedda had waited patiently upstage for Miss Tesman to depart, she decides that "fru Elvsted wants to go now," before Thea has made any move to leave. In contrast to the restraint Hedda exhibits in the first scene, and again in the next scene with Brack, these instructions suggest an extraordinary lack of restraint, matched, on Thea's part, with an equally extraordinary show of restraint. In spite of the many points of contrast between them, we can see in Hedda's uninhibited familiarity toward Thea an implied connection which, startling as it is, becomes even more curious in Act II when we see it reconstructed as part of another visual pattern, that of the triangle.

Although the pattern of triangles begins almost immediately upon the opening of the play, we are not likely to become aware of it until Brack calls our attention to it in Act II. Referring to a "triangular arrangement" where he remains Tesman's friend while he and Hedda carry on a discreet affair, he proceeds to map out the rules for such a relationship. When Tesman enters, Brack makes it explicit: "The triangle is complete." With the triangle made spatially visual, we are alerted to its significance and are reminded of what we already know about other triangular relationships: Hedda/Tesman/Miss Tesman; Thea/Tesman/Hedda; Thea/her husband/Løvborg. In the next scene, when Hedda and Løvborg reenact their past in relation to Tesman and, not coincidentally, to Brack, we recognize that each triangle is also made up of three pairs, and that any two points exist only in relation to the third point.¹²

Again it is the visual organization of the stage that can lead us to this recognition. Hedda has expertly placed Brack and Tesman in the background while she and Løvborg await Thea's arrival downstage. We note that there are many points of similarity between this scene and the previous one with Hedda and Brack: Hedda and Løvborg take the same seats she and Brack had taken earlier; Løvborg invokes a private scenario from their past, as Brack had done earlier; Hedda and Løvborg mock the fact of her marriage, as she and Brack

had also done; also, as in the previous scene, she refuses to be physically compromised. There is another kind of echo, also: as Brack earlier had structured their relationship in the context of Hedda's marriage, so she now structures a triangle in the context of Løvborg's relationship with Thea; and just as Brack had led Hedda to a betrayal of Tesman, she now leads Løvborg to a betrayal of Thea: "She's too stupid" he says, referring to Thea's innocence in those matters where Hedda was a "coward," matters which by inference are sexual. By the time Thea has arrived, Hedda has added three more triangles to the first one: she between Brack and Løvborg, she between Tesman and Løvborg, and she between Thea and Løvborg. She is bold about declaring it: "Come over here and sit beside me. I want to be in the middle."

With this picture, the political manoeuvring implicit in triangulation (placing oneself in an advantageous position) becomes on another level an image of internal conflict (the pull of multiple possibilities). There is other evidence in the scene which points to this. Just before Thea enters, as Hedda is about to begin what she calls her "confession" to Løvborg, Ibsen instructs [*It is getting dark. The hall door is opened by Berte*]. We expect her to bring in a lamp; instead, she announces Thea. Hedda [*claps the album shut and cries out with a smile*], "At last. Dearest Thea . . . Come in, please." She then [*stretches her arms towards fru Elvsted*] and cries: "My sweet Thea, I thought you were never coming." Hedda's evident relief, her cry of welcome, her outstretched arms, her insistence that Thea sit beside her--all echoes of her first greeting of Thea that morning--create the effect of light dispelling darkness. In combination with Ibsen's seemingly misplaced instruction about the growing darkness, this response gives an altogether different shading to Hedda's "I want to be in the middle." With a few deft strokes, Hedda is visually defined as grasping for a means to right the imbalance of darkness which threatens to engulf her.

But the interesting aspect of triangles is that they work differently for all parties. The ambiguity of Thea's role in the play illustrates this: if, as is generally acknowledged, she has played muse to Løvborg's creative aspirations, and will shortly inspire Tesman with the same light, Thea's own direction is away from clarity into the murkiness inhabited by Løvborg and Hedda. Read in the context of what we have seen, her "Oh, it's so good to be here" is ironic: though she has chosen it, she is ill-prepared to cope with it. When Løvborg, pulled between Hedda and Thea, focuses attention on Thea's courage, a quality Hedda lacks, Hedda [*suddenly*] changes her tone and "engages" in the deadly game they have set up, and which will rob Thea of her light and Løvborg of his life. As the men exit, Ibsen instructs: [*At the same time, Berte enters from the back room with a lighted lamp, which she sets on the parlour table*], the table where, not coincidentally, Thea's flowers also stand. But if Thea has lost the light with which she had lit the room earlier, Hedda now appears aglow: near ecstasy, she [*gets up and goes closer*] to the anxious Thea, then [*passionately throws her arms around her*], exclaiming "Oh, I think I'll burn

your hair off after all." Finally sensing danger, Thea attempts to extricate herself, but it is too late: when Berte announces supper, [*Hedda drags fru Elvsted almost forcibly toward the doorway*].

When we see Thea again at the beginning of Act III, her brightness is exhausted, like the extinguished lamp which stands beside her flowers. Huddled into the armchair beside the cold stove, she waits for Løvborg, refusing comfort. Yet, in spite of her anxiety, she allows herself to be coaxed into Hedda's bed to get some sleep, and appears [*running towards him*] only when Løvborg arrives to announce the death of "their child." The scene which will break the tie between Thea and Løvborg--and by extension, Thea and Hedda--is played out, at Løvborg's request, in Hedda's presence and completes itself in Thea's final words: "There's only darkness ahead." In light of the meanings "darkness" has already gathered for us, Thea's personal cry of anguish is a chilling reminder that Hedda and Løvborg's direction is also darkness. Within moments of Thea's exit, Løvborg makes the final revelation which will push them both over the edge: when Hedda tries to bring him back to a more mundane reality, ("After all--it was only a book--"), Løvborg answers "Thea's pure soul was in that book." "Yes, I understand," says Hedda, and almost immediately points Løvborg to his death, and proceeds to burn the manuscript.

Whatever it is that Hedda has understood--and we cannot be certain about that--we, the readers and viewers are reminded that there are Faustian implications in the actions of all the characters. In Act II Hedda admitted to both Brack and Løvborg that her marriage to Tesman was a contract which gained her a future; in Act III, Løvborg admits to Hedda that he had to relinquish his will to Thea to write his book about the future. Now he implicates Thea also. In her desperation to get what she wants from Løvborg (his love, his respect, his presence), Thea has offered what she can ill afford to give (her purpose and direction, her courage and faith--the light that constituted her soul); and in her desperation to get what she wants from Hedda, she has delivered herself, the man she loves, and their book into Hedda's hands. Having entered the dark world freely, she finds that she is subject to the same dark laws that govern Hedda and Løvborg. When Hedda sets the manuscript alight, and burns Thea's "child," it is all these shadings, these failures, that enter the equation. The collapse of order I alluded to earlier is therefore not effected by Hedda alone; far from being an innocent caught in Hedda's web, Thea has played her part in spinning the web, as have all the characters who sought Hedda out as wife, lover, or friend, and gave her power over them: they have all been instruments in the collapse. Contradictory as this is to what we know of their 'motives,' it is a dimension added by what we see.

In building his "dissenting view" of Ibsen, Ronald Gray makes the point that everything in this play appears to have been constructed with construction in mind, that "Ibsen is more concerned with directing his audience than with

the human aspects of the situation" (143). There is a sense in which I agree with the observation implied, if not with the judgement. *Hedda Gabler* is indeed a tightly structured play. However, I cannot accept that the characters are, as he claims, "unrealized" (Gray 141). On the contrary, the quality he refers to is a consequence of a structural principle that gives the play unity. As we saw in Act I, the ordering of the play world into a rigid symmetry imposes a constraint which threatens the characters' attempts to live and grow. If we think back to the patterns that have emerged from an exploration of the way stage pictures are structured into the playscript, we should have become aware that in each case movement is reductive: all the attempts Hedda makes to order her world result in deadening it; all the attempts Thea makes to light her world, drive it into further darkness. In a play where control collapses into anarchy, challenge into failure, action into stasis, movement, as it were, must cease. Act IV visually orchestrates these contradictory and paradoxical movements.

We could expect, after the destruction in Act III, to see the dramatic world in ruin; instead we see that the social conventions of death have effected a rigid order. As the curtain rises, we see the forestage in darkness; only the inner stage is lit by the hanging lamp. Hedda, dressed in black, paces the dark reception room, then moves towards the light in the back room, and out of sight. This vacating of the stage is significant, not only, as Northam suggests, as a withdrawal; more immediately it leaves us with nothing to look at--no focus for our attention. The random notes on the unseen piano, Hedda's aimless return to the main stage, the way in which she holds the curtains aside at the doors to look into the darkness are also unfocused--motion without action. By way of relief, the mourning Berte's entrance with the lamp which she places on the upstage right table has the energy of intentionality in it, as does Miss Tesman's entrance. In sharp contrast to Hedda's Act I greeting of her husband's aunt, Hedda now moves toward her with hand outstretched, asks her to sit down, and even offers her help--actions which, in the light of earlier actions, seem uncharacteristic.

Ibsen has arranged the stage so that we see all movement in the context of light. We note, for instance, that the two areas which are lit (the back room, and the upstage right corner) do not exactly correspond to Hedda's points of interest (the stove, only indirectly lit by the spill of light from the upstage lamp, and the desk, only indirectly lit by the spill of light from the back room). Because all the light is upstage, visitors received at the door are lit from behind, which must give a silhouette effect; and Assessor Brack who remains, uninvited, must stand in semi-darkness near the stove for the entire act.

The fixed lights, the restricted movement, Hedda's lack of focus, all draw attention to Tesman and Thea's purposeful activity. Searching for a place to work, Tesman first takes Thea into the back room under the hanging lamp, which must accent her flaxen-haired brightness. Ironically, though the

"spotlight" is on them, our attention is drawn to the indirectly lit pair whispering near the stove. When the light at the back proves inadequate for their work, Tesman leads Thea to Hedda's desk, taking the upstage lamp with him, but not until Hedda has removed her personal items to the back room. Thea, it appears, has found her place at Tesman's side, displacing Hedda in Tesman's life as she had also displaced Hedda in Løvborg's life. And if Thea's light had dimmed at the end of Act II and sputtered in Act III, she now shines again, albeit by a reflected light. This, that Tesman and Thea do not shine by their own light is as close as Ibsen comes to a condemnation of them. Yet it is enough.

By contrast, Hedda alternates between points of light and dark as she moves between Tesman/Thea and Brack. If we recall the images in Act II of Hedda consciously placing herself between the brightness of Thea and darkness of Løvborg and the greed with which she tried to draw Thea toward her--the impulse to set her alight, to devour her--then we observe in Ibsen's stage instructions how far this struggle has moved beyond Hedda's control. Finding herself without a place, without purpose, she is pulled toward the working couple, twice running her fingers lightly through Thea's hair--the curly hair she had symbolically burned in the stove across the room. She even makes an uncharacteristic offer of help: "Is there nothing else you two want from me?" she asks; the answer, "Absolutely nothing," leaves her no option but Brack who waits quietly for her in the darkness near the stove; she chooses instead to vacate the stage for the third time in this act. This time it is indeed a withdrawal into the back room: furthermore, when she draws the curtain between the two rooms, she leaves the parlour in darkness except for the one point of light at the desk where the industrious couple works. For a few moments we witness the tussle between Tesman, who in effect has taken control of the stage, and Hedda's presence--the wild music, the grotesque head, the mocking voice and, finally, the gunshot. When in exasperation Tesman draws the curtain, he unveils the picture of Hedda, perfectly composed, lying dead in a pool of opalescent light.

Hedda's death, we now understand, is the wilderness Ibsen has been leading us into. Presented, not as an emotional event, but as a picture--framed and lit with its own special light, and captioned by uncomprehending protests--it shocks us into clarity. And if we echo Hedda's response to Løvborg's death, "*Endelig en dåd*" (action at last), we understand that this is no *reason*, no *motive*, for her suicide. Hedda's suicide is not an event--pointless, muddled, motivated--which we must understand; it is a structurally contrived stage representation of an event which, like the burning of the manuscript, can bear meanings far beyond either the visual or the verbal schemata of the scene. In the orchestrated composition of the ending we see the meeting of the simultaneous but contradictory movements toward meaningless motion and solidified order. Dramatic action has collapsed into a picture.

Although the above investigation has often moved perilously close to interpretation, what I aimed at was something akin to Roland Barthes' aim in "Textual Analysis of a Tale of Poe": "to locate the *avenues* of meaning" (84) and "show *departures*, not arrivals, of meaning" in the text (86--Barthes' emphasis). In *Structuralist Poetics* Johnathan Culler points out that for Barthes¹³ "The task of a structuralist poetics would be to make explicit the underlying system which makes literary effects possible" (118). He goes on to say,

. . . a structuralist poetics would claim that the study of literature involves only indirectly the critical act of placing a work in situation, reading it as a gesture of a particular kind, and thus giving it a meaning. The task is rather to construct a theory of literary discourse which would account for the possibilities of interpretation, the 'empty meanings' which support a variety of full meanings but which do not permit the work to be given just any meaning. (119)

It is this tradition of critical activity that has encouraged me to reopen a text so often discussed as *Hedda Gabler* has been and attempt to locate some "avenues of meaning," some "departures" which have been overlooked by reason of critical conventions which underestimate the importance of the visual codes of a playscript. That an exploration of this sort is incomplete is unavoidable and does not, I think, lessen its merit. What it has revealed is what I have always found most interesting about Ibsen's dramaturgy: that he "places" his characters into a dynamic universe--a universe where signifiers do not presuppose signifieds and where readers must make their uneasy way among meanings that always fall short of the truth. But that is the lesson of all good plays: if we accept that drama's special significance lies in its interdependence between visual and verbal codes, then we must also accept the contradictions created when space and time, sight and sound, stasis and action are read against each other. Suzanne Langer touches on this uneasiness in her investigation of the possibility of achieving a true union in the arts: "There are no happy marriages in art--only successful rape" (86), she concludes. It is exactly this fact, that every moment on stage is an abutment of sights and sounds that must be incomprehensibly assimilated into one another and can never be sorted out into clear lines, which makes the stage such a powerful medium for the representation of human action for both viewers and readers.

University of Winnipeg

Notes

1. Inga-Stina Ewbank, commenting on the opposite trend—the privileging of visual forms by "unthinking followers of John Northam"—warns against a tendency "to assume that in Ibsen visual imagery *substitutes* for verbal"(74n). Her point is well taken: in drama where the visual and the verbal elements confront each other, we are bound to read them as *dialogue*, not as alternatives.

2. My point is not that this is new, but that such information is too seldom read ironically against the verbal text. Even Northam tends to use the information from stage instructions as an amplification of the verbal text.

3. Freddie Rokem proposes the daunting task of singling-out the stage, the fictional world and the theatrical space from the integrated theatrical event to study them as aesthetic signs, and then demonstrates how the visual design of the stage embodies the theme of the play. He identifies the theme of *Hedda Gabler* as "the struggle between [the characters'] private needs and a vocation which can take them beyond themselves into the sphere of public life" (13) and claims that the focal point of the stage corresponds with the focal point of the past, represented by the guns and the portrait of her father, which Hedda must but cannot overcome (22).

4. Similarly, Richard Hornby (1981) proposes a structuralist approach to Ibsen's staging and then turns the physical aspects of several plays into the symbolic entities of a Kierkegaardian equation. He argues that in *A Doll House*, for instance, the placement of the table across the stage from the stove divides the stage into ethical and aesthetic areas, and the network of hallways offstage represents the labyrinthine passage to freedom which Nora must negotiate.

5. See Jens Kruuse (1971) for a discussion of comedy in the play.

6. Rokem (1986) sees in the realistic stage with its fourth wall conventions a link to the baroque stage and argues that "Its central organizing principle is symmetric one-point perspective" (15). While this is an interesting connection, I am more interested in the way symmetry works to control our response than, as he is, in the ways it expresses the psychological characteristics and make-up of his characters.

7. This final detail in the pantomime is a late addition. It does not occur in the earlier draft published by McFarlane (1966, 339).

8. I am indebted to Perry Nodelman for many of the ideas in this article, and particularly for the following formulation. In *Words About Pictures* (1988), Nodelman explores similar issues in the context of picture books—another form which involves both words and pictures.

9. See Hornby (1981) for a discussion of windows in *Ghosts* and *A Doll House*.

10. James H. Clancy (1972) discusses the psychological implications of the window in relation to the "inner room."

11. I find this reading problematic because it assumes an almost automatic, and widely accepted, interiorization of the back room as Hedda's inner space. Although there clearly are associations with Hedda's past—the portrait and the piano—it is essentially a passageway to other parts of the house, and remains open playing space until the end. To identify it as "Hedda's room" and build a case for its being a symbolic representation of Hedda's inner space distorts Ibsen's use of this space.

12. See James McFarlane (1980) for a discussion on the complex and interactive structure of character relationships in Ibsen's late plays.

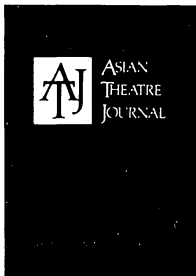
13. Culler (1975) quotes Barthes (1966) as follows: "[The task of structuralist poetics] would not be a science of contents but a science of the conditions of content, that is to say of forms. What interests it will be the variations of meaning generated and, as it were, capable of being generated by works; it will not interpret symbols but describe their polyvalency. In short, its object will not be the full meanings of the work but on the contrary the empty meanings which support them all." (*Critique et verité!* 57)

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "Textual Analysis of a Tale of Poe." In *On Signs*. Ed. Marshall Blonsky. Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins UP, 1985.
- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Hammonsworth: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1972.
- Bergson, Henri. "Laughter." In *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*. Ed. Bernard F. Dukore. New York and Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974.
- Bond, Edward. "A Note on Dramatic Method." *The Bundle*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1978.
- Clancy, James H. "Hedda Gabler: Poetry in Action and in Object." In *Studies in Theatre and Drama*. Ed. Oscar Brockett. The Hague: Mouton and Co., Printers, 1972.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.
- Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London and New York: Methuen, 1980.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina. "Ibsen and the 'Far More Difficult Art' of Prose." In *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1970.
- Gray, Ronald. *Ibsen: A Dissenting View*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.
- Hornby, Richard. *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays*. London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1981.
- Ibsen, Henrik. "Hedda Gabler." *Henrik Ibsen, Samlede Verker, III Bind*. Oslo: Glydendal Norsk Forlag, 1960.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.
- Kruuse, Jens. "The Function of Humour in the Later Plays of Ibsen." In *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*. Ed. Daniel Haakonsen. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971.
- Langer, Suzanne K. "Deceptive Analogies." In *Problems of Art*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957.
- McFarlane, James, (ed.). *The Oxford Ibsen Vol.VII*. London: Oxford UP, 1966.
- _____. "The Structured World of Ibsen's late Dramas." In *Ibsen and the Theatre*. Ed. Errol Durbach. New York: The New York UP, 1980.
- Nodelman, Perry. *Words About Pictures*. Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1988.

- Northam, John. *Ibsen: A Critical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.
- Rokem, Freddie. *Theatrical Space in Ibsen, Chekov and Strindberg*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986.
- Suzman, Janet. "Hedda Gabler: The Play in Performance." In *Ibsen and the Theatre*. Ed. Errol Durbach. New York: New York UP, 1980.

ASIAN THEATRE JOURNAL



International and intercultural semiannual of Asian performing arts, traditional & modern

In-depth coverage of the broad range of performing arts: descriptive and analytical articles, reports on current theatrical activities in Asia, and original plays and play translations

Official journal of the Association for Asian Performance

RECENT AND FORTHCOMING

Oath to Freedom, translation of a contemporary Philippine play
• CHRIS MILLADO, AL SANTOS, RODY VERA, AND ALAN GLINOVA
(Spring 1991)

A special issue featuring contemporary, experimental plays of China, Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines (Fall 1990)

Brecht Adaptations in Modern Bengali Theatre: A Study in Reception • ARUNDHATI BANERJEE (Spring 1990)

Theatre in Thailand Today • SURAPONE VIRULRAK (Spring 1990)

Vengeance and Its Toll in *Numazu*, translation of an Eighteenth Century Japanese Puppet Play (Spring 1990)

Woman's Dance Among the Sundanese of West Java, Indonesia
• IRAWATI DURBAN ARJO (Fall 1989)

USA/Canada: US\$15/yr individual, US\$30/yr institution
All Others: US\$18/yr individual, US\$35/yr institution
Airmail: Add US\$12/year

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS

Journals Department

2840 Kolowalu Street, Honolulu, HI 96822 USA